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THE ORDINANCES OF THE CHURCH

PRINCIPAL WALTER F. ADENEY, M.A., D.D.
Lancashire College, University of Manchester, England

Nobody can observe the revolutionary change that is coming over a large part of Christendom with regard to the observance of religious ordinances without perceiving the fact that we are fast approaching an acute crisis. Hitherto, all down the ages, the influence of the historic churches has led to a virtual identification of religion with its ordinances, or at least to the acceptance of a due regard for them as the sign and test of loyalty to the faith. But in the present day an increasing majority of the population of Christian countries manifests sheer indifference, if not absolute aversion, to what appear to have been the principal religious performances of their forefathers; and yet it would not be just to reckon most of these people as unbelievers who have renounced Christianity, or as altogether godless men and women who have "no part or lot in the matter." They are not content with civil marriage, have their children baptized, desire them to receive Bible teaching at school, bury their dead with the rites of the church. But here their ecclesiastical relations end. Many of them think seriously on the great problems, aim sincerely at lofty ideals, live their own life in the unseen; nevertheless the regular outward observances of religion maintained by the church are nothing to them. They go their way as though these things did not exist. What are we to say to this new situation which is so evident today both in Europe and in America?

We are called upon to face afresh the fundamental question of the ordinances of the church and to come to a clear understanding with ourselves with reference to them. Now, the *Century Dictionary* defines the word "ordinance," when used ecclesiastically, as "a religious ceremony, rite, or practice established by authority." While this definition fairly expresses the conventional idea, it clearly raises the question we want to settle by the use of the term "authority." Those people who submit their lives and consciences to ecclesias-

tical authority are *ipso facto* bound to carry out the regulations laid down by their acknowledged rulers—the church, the pope, the bishop, the priest, as the case may be. But we have to go behind that position in the present inquiry, and also to consider the position of those people who do not recognize it. The ordinances of the church may be regarded in several distinct ways by people who are equally sincere in their religious faith and equally earnest in their personal devotion. (1) They may be taken as directly commanded by God and of the essence of the religious life. (2) They may be treated as divinely ordered, and therefore obligatory though only as aids to devotion, conceded to us in condescension to our weakness. (3) They may be considered of divine origin, but only in the sense of arrangements of which we may avail ourselves if we find that we can profit by them, while we are perfectly free to dispense with them if we discover that for ourselves they are not profitable; so that, while they are a boon to the ritualistically inclined, they are negligible because useless among people of different dispositions or natures. (4) Lastly, they may be regarded as survivals of a primitive cult which was natural and useful in the childhood of religion, but which should be outgrown and laid aside with the growth of intellectual and spiritual development—as consisting of “beggarly elements,” the clinging to which is a discreditable sign of an infantine condition.

If we reflect on the history of religion, we must see that the observance of ordinances bulks largely among primitive and backward races. The savage has a poor theology, but an elaborate ritual. With primitive man the cult is more important than the creed. We must not let the fact that the editing of the Hexateuch by Ezra and the scribes came later than the ethical and spiritual teaching of the great eighth-century Hebrew prophets, prevent us from perceiving that the primitive religion of Israel was extremely ritualistic. According to Marti, our latest authority on the subject,¹ after the Israelites had escaped from the poly-demonistic type of belief prevalent among their wandering kinsfolk, and had come to “monolatry” in recognizing Yahweh as their God, in the second stage which began with the settlement in Canaan, ritual and sacrifice became

¹ *Die Religion des Alten Testaments unter den Religionen des Vorderen Orients.*

prominent. The riper religion of the prophets represented a third stage. With Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah sacrificial rites and religious ordinances generally—new moons, sabbaths, etc.—are quite subordinate to moral conduct and spiritual fidelity to God. Here, then, we have the rivalry of the two types of religion—the priestly making much of ordinances, the prophetic deprecating ordinances in contrast to ethical character. After the exile this rivalry, with its consequent controversies, ceases. Jeremiah had been a priest; Ezekiel was a priest intensely interested in a new development of ritual; Haggai and Zechariah cheered the temple-builders in view of the religion of ordinances to be there carried on; Malachi's heaviest accusations are against those who neglect the support of the temple and its services. Thus we now have the prophet in alliance with the priest furthering his ritual. Are we to consider this to be development or degeneration? Viewed ideally, it cannot appear as an advance. The eighth-century prophets were intellectually and spiritually much greater men than their successors; they penetrated more deeply into the essence of religion; they set before them higher and purer aims. Nevertheless they failed to bring the people up to their standard. They were voices crying in the wilderness. Heathenish vice and cruelty flourished in spite of their thunders of denunciation. These gross corruptions were purged out of the nation during the captivity, and the remnant that returned came as a church consecrated to the worship of Jehovah. The worship they brought with them was intensely ritualistic; but it was adapted to their condition—a worship they could appreciate and feed upon. Thus, though they had a type of religion which, judged by the standard of Christianity, must be recognized as lower than that of Isaiah or Hosea, in point of fact they were more religious and more moral than their ancestors of the eighth century, and were able to make better use of the law than the men of the old times had made of the prophets. This new religious life is reflected in the Psalter—the richest, deepest, purest expression of the devotional life the world has ever seen, unapproachable even by the hymns of the Christian church. Let it not be forgotten that the Psalter grew up under a religion of ordinances, although, on the other hand, some of the finest psalms (e. g., Pss. 40, 50, 51) belong to the anti-ritualistic school of the prophetic line.

The development of scribism into rabbinism magnified the importance of ordinances, until by the time of Christ these aids to devotion had become substitutes for devotion, actually stifling the spiritual life they were originally designed to foster; so that a large part of our Lord's ministry consisted in a protest against the abuse, with the result that his rejection by the authorities which led to his death was the direct consequence of this protest. It is not too much to say that Jesus was crucified because he opposed a religion of ordinances.

After this, what is to be said of the position of ordinances in the Christian church? These are in the main the observance of Sunday and the Christian year, public worship with the ministry of the Word, and the sacraments; to which may be added special services, such as those for marriages and funerals, although they have no New Testament precedent, and private domestic engagements, such as family prayers, "grace" at meals, etc. Did Jesus, while giving the greatest offense to the Jews by his free use of the sabbath, expect his people to transfer the fourth commandment from Saturday to Sunday; and would Paul, while bidding his readers not to let anybody judge them with regard to sabbaths (Col. 2:16) so long as these were Jewish sabbaths, support a rigid Christian sabbatarianism? With regard to the sacraments in particular, which are the central offices in most churches, it is to be observed that our Lord's position is very obscure. Although in a way the successor of John the Baptist, he never baptized. We have only one reference to the performance of baptism by his disciples during his lifetime, and that is in the Fourth Gospel (John 4:1, 2). None of the Synoptics make the slightest allusion to the subject. The commission to administer baptism which goes with the baptismal formula in one of these gospels (Matt. 28:19) has a measure of doubt cast upon it by recent criticism. Before any manuscript flaw in the text had been discovered, it had been rejected by Weizsäcker, Harnack, Scholten, Holtzmann, Teichmann, and others, purely on grounds of internal criticism; and now their views are powerfully supported by Mr. Conybeare's discovery that the baptismal part of the passage is absent from all Eusebius' earlier quotations of it. The only other place where Jesus is represented as

commanding baptism occurs in those concluding verses of the second gospel which are now undoubtedly rejected as not belonging to the original document (Mark 16:16). Then we are in the midst of a controversy on the question whether Christ ever commanded the Lord's Supper to be repeated as an ordinance of the church. Neither of the two earliest gospels records any such requirement. We meet with it in Paul (I Cor. 11:24), and also in Luke 22:19, who here appears to be more or less dependent on Paul.² Spitta argues strongly against the idea that our Lord commanded the repetition of the Supper as an ordinance of the church,³ and he is supported by Titius, Pfeiderer, Jülicher, and others. Dr. Briggs suggests that our Lord gave the commission for this observance after his resurrection.⁴ It is too much to expect us to believe that Paul deliberately devised the repetition of what had occurred in the upper room of his own initiative, nor does he imply that he received his direction concerning it by a vision. His language points to a tradition which he knew to have started from Christ himself.⁵

But while we may have good reason for supposing that Paul, and after him Luke, were not misinterpreting their Master's intention, is not this whole discussion, as far as it is more than merely literary and historical, somewhat pedantic? If we stand back from the picture of our Lord's life and regard it in its broad features, we cannot but see that religious ordinances as such meant very little to him. It cannot be that he fought so strenuously against the dead formalism of the scribes only to substitute new rites of his own creation. When he denounced the absurdity of pharisaic washing, it is not to substitute Christian baptism, but to require the cleansing of the heart; and when he liberates his disciples from the requirements of fasting, it is not to order them to partake of the Eucharist, but to introduce them to the joy of God's free children. Similarly, when Paul protests so vehemently against the bondage of the Galatians to Jewish ordinances, or defends the Colossians

² Justin Martyr also has the *τοῦτο ποιεῖτε* (I *Apol.* 66).

³ *Urchristentum*, pp. 301 ff.

⁴ *The Messiah of the Gospels*, p. 123.

⁵ ἐγὼ γὰρ παρέλαβον (I Cor. 11:23), the last word being the regular term for receiving a tradition.

in their freedom from those ordinances, it cannot be that he intends to substitute the new-forged fetters of Christian ordinances. He does not merely protest against Judaism as a specific religion of law, but against the idea of external performances as obligatory religious duties, over against which he sets the spiritual life, and the fruits of the spirit.

Must we not say, then, that the whole trend and tendency of the teaching and example of Christ and his disciples is against making much of ordinances and in line with the eighth-century prophets who demand justice and mercy, rather than festivals and sacrifices? Even James, the most Jewish of the New Testament writers, declares that the true ritual is to "visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world."

When we consider the condition of the primitive church, we find little made of ordinances, but much made of the charities of life. Religious worship was still free and unconventional, as Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians abundantly testifies. Even so pronounced an ecclesiastic as Bishop Wordsworth says: "As far as the prayers outside the Lord's Prayer were fixed, they probably consisted of the Psalms, which were the only formal prayers of the Christian church for a long period, except the Lord's Prayer."⁶ In primitive times Sunday was never regarded as a Christian sabbath. The Greek church long observed both Saturday and Sunday. According to Bishop Wordsworth, the Christian Sunday service grew out of the Jewish sabbath evening service and was at first either confined to a continuation of it into or through the night, or was followed after an interval of repose by an early sermon on Sunday⁷—surely a very questionable statement! It is more historical to say that the Sunday morning assembly of the early Christians was a spontaneous, joyous commemoration of their Lord's resurrection, having at first no connection whatever with the Jewish sabbath, not being in any sense an ordinance, and only in course of generations accreting to itself Jewish sabbatical notions. Easter was the most ancient and sacred of all the annual church festivals. Yet the historian Socrates, writing late in the fifth century, says:

⁶ *The Ministry of Grace*, p. 307.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

“Neither the Savior nor the apostles commanded us to keep this feast by any law; nor did the gospel or the apostles impose it upon us by threat of fine or punishment or curse, as the law of Moses did to the Jews;”⁸ and he adds that the observance of Easter arose from custom rather than from direct command, confirming this statement by pointing to the divergence in date assigned to the festival by different churches in early times.

It is evident, then, that the modern indifference to religious ordinances which appears to be so alarming in the eyes of many of our church leaders is not—at all events on the surface of it—so alien to the teaching of the Old Testament prophets or that of our Lord and his apostles or the practice of primitive Christian times. Nevertheless, this is not the end of the controversy. The situation demands to be examined more closely.

In the first place, we cannot judge the religious state of a people by the measure of its observance or non-observance of ordinances. If we could do so, we should have to conclude that Spain and Russia were more Christian than England or America. The rough method of church-attendance statistics is a fallacious test of the progress or decline of real religion. When it was obligatory to go to church on pain of social ostracism, all respectable people made a point of being seen in their pews on Sunday, just as today all respectable people make a point of returning morning calls. The removal of the social obligation means that people who have no real religion have now little inducement to practice the forms of religion. As far as such people are concerned, the result is a gain in their escape from an odious course of hypocrisy. Then we may conclude that there is a higher average of sincerity left among those who still observe the ordinances. Consequently, the tone and character of the congregations will be better than formerly, and the same number of attendants at public worship will count for more than under the ancient régime. Conversely, the non-attendance of many people will mean less on the other side. Formerly, for a man who prized his reputation, it required some moral courage to abstain deliberately from church-going; he became a marked man. That is not the case today. Many people have their own

⁸ *His. Eccl.*, V, 22.

religion, while they will have nothing to do with the religion of the churches. It is not just to condemn such people as godless men and women. By so doing we may fall into the error of the disciples who were rebuked by their Master for desiring him to forbid a man using his name because that man did not join their company. We are too ready to condemn people simply because they "follow not with us," without considering that, in spite of this painful slight to the church, they may still be following Christ.

The most disconcerting fact to the thoughtful minister is not the indifference of the multitude; it is the increasing neglect of the ordinances of the church by men of intelligence and character as doctors, lawyers, artists, writers, scholars, experts in science. We are not quite in a condition similar to that of a century ago, when John Foster wrote his celebrated essay on *The Aversion of Men of Taste to Evangelical Religion*; still less are we in the state of England fifty years earlier, when, as Bishop Butler tells us, intellectual people took for granted that Christianity was a delusion, so that there was no need even to combat it. Among thinking men there is a remarkable return both toward faith in the unseen and toward reverence for Jesus Christ. But this goes with a growing indifference to religious ordinances. Educated people say that they cannot endure the commonplaces of the pulpit, will not submit their minds to the direction of the minister, find richer pabulum in intercourse with Nature, their favorite authors, and more congenial intercourse with their chosen friends than in the church and its associations. We must admit that there is a large amount of reason in such confessions. We feel it in reading the meditations of Mr. A. C. Benson in his "College Window." And yet the argument of them is not unanswerable. Is it not possible that they may issue in spiritual arrogance? After all, the first place in religion does not belong to the thinker; it is due to the saint. And the saint may be neither a naturally intellectual nor a highly educated person. His ideas may be poor, regarded from the standpoint of philosophy or culture. But religion is not a matter of ideas; primarily it is an affair of character. Its deepest note is charity; and the new separation does not obviously make for broad and active brotherly love. St. Francis did not display the wit of Erasmus; George Fox was an inspired

teacher who lacked university culture. We must not forget the lesson of Browning's "Christmas Day" and "Easter Eve." The stuffy chapel may be unendurable. Still much may be borne for the sake of humility and charity. It is beautiful to think of that great man of science, Faraday, in his Sandemanian chapel. The danger is that religion should be regarded as a matter of taste, rather than as a question of conscience. That this danger is very real is proved by the ominous decline of the sense of sin in the modern world. We would aim at lofty ideals, and cultivate choice thoughts; but we are slow to stand like the publican smiting his breast and crying, "God be merciful to me a sinner." In our pursuit of the congenial idea we may be ignoring the condemning truth. Then, in turning from the intellectual narrowness and shallowness of the church, we shall become victims of a moral narrowness and shallowness that is infinitely more despicable. It is true that the modern cultured man is usually modest and not censorious. He may not condemn the church he does not attend, nor pose as superior to the congregation with which he does not associate. He may simply say that they do not interest him and that he gains no good from them. Might he not consider what he could contribute to the work of the church and the service of mankind for which this stands? Perhaps he would reply that he is willing to do his part if the church would let him ignore the ordinances that personally he finds to be profitless. But at present he does not do this. Rejecting the ordinances, he also withdraws from the activities of the church. Here is plain loss to the cause of human welfare.

But we cannot consider the cultivated man by himself. He is part of the community. When we look abroad on the mass of non-churchgoers, the widest generosity of sentiment will not permit us to justify their position on the ground of deliberate conviction or serious purpose. They are simply indifferent. The pressure of business, the excitement of sport, the superior attractiveness of popular amusements, the smartness of the newspaper, magazine, and novel, the brilliant color (though as of crude aniline dyes) that marks up-to-date life—all this make the church look dull, her ordinances tame, her preaching uninteresting. We may say that this is the effect of self-indulgence, and that it goes on the assump-

tion that it is the business of the church to compete with the music hall in affording amusement to the public. Still, there is the fact, and it must be faced. Now, it cannot be pretended that people in this condition have outgrown the ordinances of religion; it is rather the case that they have not come up to them. We may look forward to the time when no religious ordinances will be needed because pure spiritual religion will be practiced without them. That would seem to be the ultimate goal of our Lord's teaching. But we are far from that goal as yet. Most people need aids to devotion. But if they will not have the church's aids, what is to be done? It is useless to go on grinding the mill if the grain goes elsewhere. The crisis that is upon us demands firm handling. First, mere conventions must go. They had their day when compliance was the rule. They will never recall the recalcitrant. Absolute sincerity in all our religious work is the primary necessity. We must no longer be content to go through a round of services from which the people simply drift away—as the proportional statistics of church attendance prove they are drifting. The church must become more missionary. Her leaders must be fishers of men. There must be more flexibility, more variety, more adaptability in the services. Ordinances must not be observed as ends in themselves, must only be used as means to the true end of religion which is love to God and love to man. They must be modified and adjusted to suit this end. Preaching must become a reality. The world cares nothing for the pulpit essay, however much this may interest the select coterie to which it is decorously delivered on Sunday; the world finds much more brilliant essays by the score in the popular magazine. But the world dare not and cannot neglect the living voice, uttering burning words, sincere, sympathetic, with a great end in view—the voice of a Chrysostom, a Luther, a Wesley, a Jonathan Edwards. Alas! where is that voice? We cannot expect it by the thousand, sufficiently divided out to fill every pulpit. But sincerity and sympathy are two notes that may be cultivated by the humblest preacher, and their penetrating power is not to be despised.